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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000640

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: MANUEL ROSALES RUNNING FOR MARACAIBO MAYOR

REF: CARACAS 000625

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT RICHARD DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4. (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales is planning to run for the Maracaibo mayorship, according to Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) party leaders. Rosales is telling his party that he needs to run in order to boost the UNT's prospects for his young protQgQ to replace him as governor and for the opposition to win back the Maracaibo mayorship. Rosales was an effective mayor of Maracaibo before becoming governor. Returning to the job would keep Rosales in the media spotlight and provide him with continued staff and resources. Other opposition leaders are urging Rosales not to run, but rather to focus on his role as the de facto leader of the fractured opposition. Pro-government politicians are trying to discredit Rosales and other opposition leaders in western Venezuela by accusing them of secessionist ambitions. If Rosales does run for the mayorship of Maracaibo, he is likely to boost the opposition's electoral prospects in Zulia. He may also contribute to opposition discord and voter disenchantment with "professional" politicians. End Summary.

From Presidential to Mayoral Candidate

12. (SBU) Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales was the consensus opposition presidential candidate in 2006 and has since tried with very limited success to serve as Venezuela's de facto opposition leader. Rosales is in his second term as governor of Zulia and therefore ineligible to run for re-election due to term limits. Local media outlets are reporting that Rosales is considering running for the mayor of Maracaibo, the capital of Zulia and Venezuela's second largest city. Rosales was widely perceived as an effective mayor of Maracaibo (1996-2000) prior to becoming governor of Zulia.

Hard Feelings

13. (C) Even rumors of Rosales running for Maracaibo mayor sparked criticism from within the opposition, particularly from the rival Primero Justicia (PJ) party. PJ Chief Julio Borges told the media in mid-April that "once you make the major leagues, you can't go back to play in the Venezuelan league." Borges urged Rosales to assume a more prominent national role after leaving the Zulia governorship. Not surprising, PJ's candidate for the Maracaibo mayorship, Juan Pablo Guanipa exhorted Rosales to promote the emergence of

new leaders. PJ Mayor of Baruta Henrique Capriles Radonski told PolCouns May 6 that he thinks Rosales would be making a mistake to run for a "lower" office after being governor and should focus on building his party.

14. (C) Despite the misgivings of many in the opposition, Rosales currently intends to run for the Maracaibo mayorship, according to UNT Secretary General Gerardo Blyde. Blyde told Poloff May 5 that he shares those misgivings, but Rosales argues that he needs to run to help boost the prospects of UNT's candidate to succeed Rosales as governor of Zulia, Pablo Perez, and to return Maracaibo to the opposition. Perez ran unsuccessfully for the Maracaibo mayorship four years ago and is currently serving as Rosales' appointed deputy in the Zulia state government. Saady Bijani, the two-term Christian Democrat (COPEI) mayor of San Francisco, Zulia's second-largest municipality, is running a strong campaign to be the opposition's consensus candidate for governor.

PSUV Attack Campaign

15. (C) National Assembly members of President Chavez' United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) are leading an attack campaign against Rosales and other opposition leaders from Zulia. Picking up on the Venezuelan president's accusations of secessionism (Reftel), PSUV National Assembly members accused the opposition of conspiring to "break away" several western states, particularly Rosales' home state of Zulia (Septel). PSUV NA deputy Calixto Ortega of Zulia played a prominent role during the National Assembly's May 8 session to discuss this issue. Ortega is vying for the PSUV nomination to run for Maracaibo mayor.

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Comment

16. (C) Latin America has a long tradition of mayors playing a prominent role in national politics. Vying for the mayorship of Venezuela's most important city after Caracas will keep Rosales in the political spotlight, and should he win, afford him both the position and staff to support his role as Venezuela's most prominent leader of the fractured opposition. Moreover, Rosales should be able to help the opposition retain the Zulia governorship as well as recovering the Maracaibo mayorship.

17. (C) On the other hand, Rosales' mayoral candidacy does open the opposition to legitimate criticism that "old faces" are not exactly making way for "new faces." Moreover, as opposition leaders increasingly focus on state and local races, they have left something of a political vacuum on national issues. For example, it was opposition-oriented media and civil society organizations, and not opposition parties, that played the leading role in forcing President Chavez to postpone implementation of an ideologically-laden K-12 Bolivarian school curriculum until 2009.

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